THE AGONY AND THE ECSTACY
Psalm 13, 22, selected
April 5, 1981

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Kremlin watchers have long known the meaning of the adage, "He is conspicuous by his absence". Whenever there is a shake-up in Soviet Government or Communist Party leadership, those who emerge intact traditionally attend the Bolshoi Ballet together. Everyone knows what is happening and what it means. Every eye is on the group to determine who is not there, the former leader now fallen from grace. He is, as it were, most conspicuous by his absence.

God is like that sometimes, conspicuous more for His absence than His presence. Other centuries, other ages were characterized by a strong sense of God's presence. Historians call the two centuries before the Reformation "The Age of Spirituality". In the early days of this republic, someone has written, God's providence lies over New England like a benediction. But, latter twentieth century, the most significant religious experience is the silence of God, the absence of God. "Deus Abscondus" the God who has fled, forsaken... Literature and art and cinema are full of it. Elie Wiesel, the distinguished Jewish author and concentration camp survivor, has written about the idea on a profoundly theological level. In an incident in one of his books, almost too ghastly to recount, he recalls watching as the S.S. hanged two Jewish men and a young boy. Forced to witness it, he remembers that someone behind him spat out the words, "Where is God? Where is God now?" Wiesel recalls a voice inside himself responding: "Where is God? He's there. God is there on the gallows." And you don't know whether Wiesel means that literally - that God enters into human suffering that profoundly, or whether he means that God died, that the comfortable deity of his childhood disappeared in confrontation with demonic evil. It's not certain although one suspects it is more the latter than the former.

Last December four American nuns were murdered on the highway between the airport and San Salvador, capital of El Salvador. Shortly before her death, Sister Maura Clarke wrote: "What is happening here is impossible. The endurance of the poor and their faith through this terrible pain is constantly pulling me to a deeper faith response. My fear of death is being challenged constantly as children, lovely young girls, and old people are being shot - bodies thrown by the road...I want to stay on now. I believe right now that this is right...God is present in his seeming absence." (The Christian Century, 4/8/81, p.372). Jewish philosopher Martin Buber called it "the eclipse of God", and contemporary Old Testament scholar Bernard Anderson writes: "Perhaps modern men are coming to know even more radically than the Psalmists that in the time of God's silence we must wait for God to show himself." (Out of the Depths, p.72).

The absence of God may be the most significant religious experience of our age, but it is certainly not unique, or new with us. The Bible is full of it. The Bible contains a long line of complainers, queued up in front of the manager's office waiting not so patiently to make a case with the Almighty - Moses, Jonah, Isaiah, Job. "The patience of Job" is totally misleading, by the way. Job wasn't patient. He was a vigorous complainer. Brilliantly, for chapter after chapter, Job reads off his list of objections to the management, "Today also my complaint is bitter, his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat." (23:1,2).

The Greek stoics developed their legendary ability to bear up under life's unfairness, under suffering, tragedy and death without so much as a whimper. The goal was to live without responding. But not the Jews - and their Christian cousins. We are - all of us - lined up before the mercy seat - complaining.

What about? Everything under the sun, actually. "Why do my enemies prosper? How come bad people get rich? Why do you want me to go to see Pharaoh - or to preach to Nineveh - or to prophecy in Israel? How was the Third Reich possible - or the Roman

Empire - or the Babylonians for that matter? Personal matters,too. Why didn't you make me thinner or taller or smarter or more attractive? Why am I bald and that scoundrel has a head full of curls? Why me, dear God? The common thread, the essential complaint, however, is related to God's absence. It is called a lament. The Psalter is full of them The ancient lamenters are skilled, energetic complainers. They talk to God while lamentir that God is not listening. Even on death's door itself, with barely enough strength left to talk, they are still at it. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We don't ordinarily include heavy complaining as a category of appropriate prayer. Those of us who must pray publically have read books that tell us that good prayers includ a progression from adoration to confession to thanksgiving to intercession to petition, as if God somehow had a literary agent screening out poorly constructed prayers. But not onc have I read what has to be a fundamentally appropriate Biblical position; namely, that praying is, at least in part, complaining. It's all right in the Bible to struggle with God. In the Bible God is so immediate and faith so intense that it's perfectly appropriat to contend with Him and argue with Him. Our proper Anglo Saxon literary roots produce phrases like this - "Almighty God, by whose providence all things work for good, do thou give us strength to withstand the trials with which thou hast visited thy people." But in the Bible that would come out: "God Almighty, now look what you got me into." We make the mistake, the serious misunderstanding, of defining faith and doubt as opposites. We assume that believing in God means maintaining a constnat level of credibility in our spirits. But not in the Bible. In the Bible faith and doubt go together. In fact, there is a sense in which only the person of faith can doubt, and only the person who has doubtec really knows what faith is - a lament, a complaint to God about his absence, is only possible after all, because there is a God to whom to complain. In the Bible, the lamenter is a person of deep faith.

The issue that precipitates it has always been suffering. The experience which still tries the faith of faithful people is tragedy, pain, senseless, relentless suffering. At a distance it precipitates philosophic conflict. "How", we used to ask, in our best sophomoric objectivity, "can a sovereign God who loves the world allow for the reality of evil?" "If God is good: if God is ultimate then good is ultimate and there can be no evil...then why are people dying out there?" A little closer to home, we wonder about the Atlanta children and the Arlington fire at Christmas. And very close to home we agonize over a friend with a malignancy, a premature heart attack, a baby with a birth defect. And then sooner or later each of us experiences, existentially, the absolute loneliness of pain the isolation of sickness unto death, and we know the human agony bound up in the ancient phrase, "My God, why?"

In the abstract the answers to the question have been offered for centuries. Without any justification, I conclude, some have always wanted to attribute suffering and evil to the will of God. And in the absence of anything better sometimes we have joined their ranks and summoned courage to endure in the prayer, "Thy will be done". But God does not will suffering any more than human parents cause their own children to suffer. God doesn't will suffering even to teach us something, which is the second way the question is answered. We can learn by suffering. We do live in a cause and effect world. If we do the wrong things to our bodies we will get sick, not because God orchestrated it. We live in a just universe. Read the book of Amos, and then read about El Salvador. When rich people exploi poor people, tragedy will happen. God doesn't cause it. Or more immediately, God didn't plan what happened outside a Washington hotel last Monday. He didn't even arrange it to teach us anything. That happened because it is possible for people with psychiatric disorders to buy handguns. Apparently we are the only people in the world who don't understand that when anyone can buy a weapon designed to kill other people, people are going to be killed. God doesn't do that, not even for our edification. It is possible to learn something from it, although there is no indication that we will.

Suffering happens, evil is real, because of freedom. That's the only philosophic position that makes sense. God does not preplan human life and then make arrangements fo everything to happen according to plan. That is determinism. It has been called predestination mistakenly by people who don't understand it. It is philosophic determinism and it means that whatever happens was supposed to happen including the Arlington fire an the Atlanta murders. The Judea-Christian faith, on the other hand, believes in a God who did His creating in a context of radical freedom in which accidents happen, biological accidents such as cells going crazy and forming a tumor, or engines failing, or the exist tial freedom for a man to get drunk and drive his car into the path of another car. God' role in that is predicated on freedom. He can't prevent without violating, any more than you can prevent misfortune in the life of your child without violating the child's integr and development and personhood.

But that's all so abstract. It's good to plow through it now, because at the time i happens the normative human experience is abandonment, loneliness, silence. That is how was for our Lord. There has always been an understandable need on the part of historical bystanders to soften what happened to Him. The oldest heresy in the books held that Jesus was not fully human so therefore He did not fully experience human pain and human death. Theologically we have worked hard to devise high Christologies which maintain that God pr planned crucifixion as a kind of morbid audio visual to show His love, or that Jesus was divine He had to know everything that would happen, so that getting crucified, if not fun, at least wasn't a surprise. And all of it - all the centuries of theological discomfort, all the dis-ease we feel at a Lord who could get into such a mess, comes crashing down on the hard realities of what the narrative remembers Him saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He died alone, abandoned by His friends, betrayed by one of them, anoth denying that He even knew Him. He had give His life to ideals of love, forgiveness, gentl ness, justice and here He was, nailed to the cross beam of Roman capital punishment. There is nothing about that story that leads me to conclude that Jesus was acting out a script. There is nothing about it that leads me to conclude anything other than that He was a man, human, and that He felt exquisite physical pain and exquisite heartbreak as strength ebbed and senses grew numb. He died wondering why God had let it happen.

And so history has softened that human agony with gentle heresy. And we join the conspiracy by turning the instrument of His agony into a piece of jewelry, or fine, expens burnished brass altar ware. And we further soften it by removing the cross and relegating Christian discipleship to a kind of psychological physical fitness, the end product of which is self awareness, satisfaction, peace of mind. We soften the reality of the cross by detaching it from life, barricading the Christian faith behind walls of politics and economics so that religion in this culture seems sometimes to have nothing to do with anything but religion.

The Good News of the Gospel is good only as we confront the bad news first. There is no way to attach oneself to this Jesus without confronting what happened to Him. There is no Christianity without crucifixion, no Gospel without a cross, no resurrection without death. We have to come, ultimately to the cross. Some of us will come to it physically, not many,pray God, but in every age, from Peter - crucified upside down in Rome, to Archbishop Romero, gunned down in mass, some of His followers die His death. And some of us will come intellectually,waging the war, the long relentless struggle in the mind over the reality of evil and the nagging questions precipitated by meaningless suffering. And many of us, perhaps all of us, must come to that cross at a very personal and very deep level, laying before Jesus Christ the awful truth that sometimes we don't believe and can't belie sometimes all we can do is doubt and mouth the words others have written and sing the song others have composed. Sooner or later all of us, although none of us want it this way, must bring to the cross the same despair, the complaint, the lament itself...In Fred Buechner's strong words:

> "'My God why hast thou forsaken me?' My God, where the Hell are you, meaning if thou art our Father who are in heaven, be thou also our Father who art in Hell because Hell is where the action is, where I am and where the cross is. It is where the pitiless storm is. It is where men and women labor and are heavy laden under the burden of their own lives without you." (Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale, p.39).

The Good News is that there is a God to whom to level our laments. The ecstacy of faith is precisely a God loving enough to hear our agony. "God", St. Paul said magnificently, "was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself." What is reconciling and redeeming and saving about Jesus Christ is not that He provided an explanation to the riddle of evil, but that He entered into it. He bore it in His body. He knows. He understands.

In the Roman Mass the devout believe that the sacrifice of the cross is reenacted. And while we Protestants have difficulty with that ecclesiastically and liturgically and theologically, the Good News is that in Jesus Christ, God participates fully in our life. The cross is not a still photo of an event that happened long ago but a motion picture: a current event which, in God's grace and steadfast love happens over and over again, for us and with us.

The saving thing about that is that He is ready to hear your agony and ecstacy. He will hear your lament. He will understand it even when you think He isn't listening and has forgotten about you. The cross of Jesus Christ is a symbol of a God whose love will not let us go...a God who is present - particularly when He seems absent...a God to whom we can turn precisely when we think He has forsaken us.

> See from His head, His hands, His feet,
> Sorrow and love flow mingled down
> Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
> Or thorns compose so rich a crown.
>
> Amen.

God our Father, we don't understand. We struggle with perplexing questions and we learn to live with relentless doubt. Now, and in the days ahead, help us simply to stand under the cross on which Jesus, Your Son, died.

Amen.